Pedagogical choices in primary English

Book Section

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CHAPTER 6

Pedagogical Choices In Primary English

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This chapter focuses on the importance of subject leaders developing an awareness and understanding of effective literacy pedagogy in order to articulate and make visible the choices they make as they lead English in their schools. In some countries, student teachers learn to be pedagogues, whilst in other countries, pedagogy is a subject in and of itself. Over the last 20 years, educationalists like Robin Alexander have made the case for teachers reclaiming the language of teaching and making visible the basis of their decision-making. The chapter also outlines the characteristics of effective teachers of literacy, many of whom go onto lead English within their schools.

Pedagogy and pedagogues

If teaching is the classroom act narrowly defined, pedagogy is that act together with the ideas that inform it. (Alexander, 2010:280)

Robin Alexander (2000) refers to a teacher's act of reflection on their practice as

making visible their pedagogy. A teacher's pedagogy is about more than what they do or say in the classroom, it comprises their 'ideas, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and understanding about the curriculum, the teaching and learning process and their students' (Westbrook *et al.*, 2013:7).

We know from research that literacy outcomes for pupils can be boosted if they are taught by 'very effective' teachers, in some cases, by as much as a third of an examination grade (Machin & Murphy, 2011:5). However, the National College of School Leadership (2012) argues that little attention has been given to what constitutes effective teaching, which they define as 'the behaviours and actions of good teachers; what good teachers do to promote good learning' (p.1). Pedagogy is sometimes referred to as the 'science' of teaching, and educationalists like Ken Robinson talk of teaching as an 'art' form. Whilst this sounds creative and interesting, it doesn't necessarily get to the heart of what it is that subject leaders need to know and do to enact good practice in English. The concept of 'pedagogy' feels relatively new to teachers in this country and there has been an absence of 'critical accounts of pedagogy' (Murphy, 2008:28). In other countries, the study of pedagogy is taken for granted, with students learning a subject called 'pedagogy' and teachers referring to themselves as 'pedagogues'. In Denmark, a 'pedagogue' is usually an early years teacher, whilst in Hungary the words *teachers* (of all ages) and *pedagogues* are used synonymously.

As a subject leader, you may be asked by teachers or governors what your rationale is for a new initiative or change in policy. In your response to them, you will be basing your explanations on your understanding of pedagogy – you just might not have called it that before. For example, you might refer to 'active' pedagogy or 'child-centered' pedagogy, or you might just have a passion or enthusiasm for a particular approach to the teaching of English. You may hear an inspirational speaker explain talk for writing or attend a stimulating course on the use of picture books in Key Stage 2 and just know that's the right approach for your children. What the speaker and course are tapping into are your beliefs and attitudes about what constitutes good English learning and teaching.

If you're finding it difficult to articulate your pedagogy, then don't be too disheartened; over recent decades, the focus in England has been on the curriculum

rather than on a shared discourse about teaching methods (Alexander, 2000). ~~Since~~ The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in the late 1990s, and the subsequent 20 years of ever-changing government guidance, resulted in teachers seeing themselves as deliverers of a transmission model of learning rather than as teachers who were enablers using the very best evidence-based teaching approaches to match the needs of their pupils (Alexander, 2010). However, effective teachers of literacy have always been clear about how they interpret policy and national initiatives by ensuring that they plan for purposeful reading and writing activities (Fox *et al.*, 2001). This would suggest that there are teachers who have a clear sense of the necessary subject knowledge and ideas for literacy practices that are embedded in their classroom practice. For other teachers this process is more of a struggle and this can cause issues for you as a subject leader. As Robin Alexander (2010: 412) asserted, 'if we are unable to define teaching then we are unable to say what kinds of expertise it requires'.

As an English subject leader, you need to ensure that your practice is constantly reviewed so that the way in which you lead English across the school is based on the latest evidence. Knowing where to find this information can feel challenging – English reports from Ofsted like *Moving English Forward* (2013) are a useful starting point, as they highlight effective practice gathered from observations and findings of outstanding schools. More recently, one of the Chartered College of Teaching's aims is to support teachers and subject leaders by signposting evidence-based approaches through their online research digests and research hubs. Making explicit the evidence and values on which you base your decision-making will further support you in creating a vision for outstanding English learning and teaching across your school.

Evidence-informed practice

As the subject leader, you will often be involved in interpreting government policy or guidance, often through a process that Alexander (2009) refers to as 'curriculum metamorphosis' (p.8). It is possible to track this process through the ways in which teachers talk about their practice. Bruning and Horn's (2000) research into writing motivation highlighted that teachers' views and beliefs about writing (and reading) are often made visible through their planning and teaching. Teachers who plan

activities designed to motivate developing writers were able to understand 'the power and pleasure of writing (and reading)' (p. 35).

In the following examples of teachers' reflections on their practice, you may wish to consider two questions:

1. To what extent is the language of policy explicit in the teacher's explanation of their practice?
2. How do the teachers express their beliefs, values and ideas about English through their descriptions of classroom practice?

You may find it useful to work with your own school staff in a similar way; asking teachers about their practice in a professional conversation before reviewing what they say often makes visible their pedagogical beliefs and practices. This is especially useful if you are supporting a teacher to improve or refine their practice.

Professional testimonies – talking about practice

Here, two teachers, Sam, who's been teaching in Key Stage 1 for six years and Terrie, a Reception teacher with twenty years experience, reflect on their approach to the teaching of reading (Chamberlain, 2010).

Uncertainty about practice - Sam – Year 2 teacher

I suppose… well… hopefully an inviting book corner as much as I can, even if it means I'm on at them about keeping it nice, looking after things and putting things away. In the morning they often come in and choose a book and sit and do sort of quiet reading on the carpet and I might have some words of the week or something like that up that they can try and find them in books. So it's kind of like a nice reading experience. Well, I have reading once a week and it's just something that I find really difficult to do, to manage. I think because I don't really know how to do it properly. If you could sit in a room with a group of five children that would probably be much easier… I find really difficult to do on a regular basis. Lots of bits around the room with words up in the role play area and lots of things like that and trying to

get them to… if they've got to find something they need to look at labels on things, those sorts of things.

For Sam, the key points here appear to be about the organisational issues associated with reading and not on the process of reading itself, therefore, we don't get a clear sense of what she thinks is important. However, despite the lack reading pedagogy, Sam is able to reflect on where the difficulties lie – and that in itself demonstrates an awareness that the practice of her classroom is not necessarily aligned to what she knows good teaching of reading should look like. Sam was responding to the question, 'What's your approach to reading?' and her responses suggest a difficulty in knowing how to explain her practice - there's a meta-language that she's struggling to find. Now compare Sam's response with Terrie, a more experienced teacher.

An awareness of practice – Terrie, Reception teacher

We usually do the literacy appreciation, so we do a book, just on reading it but I do lots of questioning and we talk about the comprehending and thinking about what's in the book not just what I'm hearing. So we look at pictures, we do picture talk, so then if I don't do that then I alternate it with a picture talk lesson where we do the same thing, where we're looking for things and doing language concepts.

Even though Terrie's response is shorter, we know more about her pedagogy, both in terms of her beliefs and attitudes but also how this translates into the practice in her classroom. Unlike Sam, she has the meta-language; she talks of literacy appreciation; questioning; comprehending; thinking; picture talk; picture talk lesson; and, language concepts. Note also the nuance in her reference between *picture talk* and a *picture talk lesson.* If you were to describe your approach to reading, or maybe the school's approach, what would the listener learn about your reading pedagogy?

Effective teachers of literacy

We learned at the start of this chapter that children learn better if very 'effective' teachers teach them. We have also learned that in order to be that very effective teacher, you need to understand what it is that you are basing your classroom practice on, your pedagogical approach. Rudduck and Flutter (2004) argue that teachers need to do more to help pupils engage in a 'focused discussion' about learning and

themselves as learners. The same could be said to be true of teachers, as Anthea Millett (ex-Head of the then Teacher Training Agency) asserted at the turn of the century, 'teachers must start talking about teaching not learning' (1998).

Shifting practice

However, there are many teachers who have always been able to do both. For example, in a small-scale study of teachers across Australia and England (Chamberlain, 2010) there was evidence of subject leaders who had begun to anticipate rather than wait for policy change that led to shifts in practice. For example, three years before the writing curriculum changed its focus from 'genre' to 'purpose' (DfE, 2013), these teachers were already ahead of the game.

Our main shift has been teaching kids about the fact that we write for different purposes, that authors write for different purposes and these are the reasons why you write... but if you're writing to entertain, not just narratives, they might be poems, they might be this, they might be that.

One of the key factors in understanding how effective teachers of literacy operate is knowing that what underpins their practice is an understanding of not only subject knowledge but also what it means to be a developing reader and writer. Alexander (2010) suggests that to help children articulate their desire to know what and why they are engaged in a task they need to be brought 'inside the thinking that informs the teacher's decisions on their behalf' (p. 282). This awareness of the value in communicating ideas and making explicit belief systems about the teaching of literacy were found to be key factors in Wray *et al's* (2000) research into effective teachers of literacy. Of note to subject leaders when planning the English curriculum, is that effective teachers 'made the purposes and processes of literacy explicit for their pupils' (p.83). Naomi Flynn's (2007) case study of three teachers in an inner-city school also highlights that effective literacy teachers (that means you as the English subject leader) have an awareness of the complexity of literacy teaching. Furthermore, what is essential is an understanding of the interconnectivity of 'teacher behaviour, teacher subject knowledge and teacher–pupil interaction (p.145). In short, to explain all three aspects is to articulate effective literacy pedagogy.

An embedded teacher of literacy

Pedagogy is central to learning. It is a dynamic relationship between 'learning, teacher and culture' (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017) and this is illustrated in the following case study of Richard, a teacher in his seventh year of teaching. He trained as a primary teacher with a specialism in PE before, in his first school, developing and leading in Computing and ICT. His route into English is not a traditional one but, as you reflect on what he knows about literacy pedagogy, consider the following:

- His ideas, beliefs and attitudes;
- His knowledge and understanding about the curriculum;
- His knowledge of the teaching and learning process;
- His awareness of his pupils and their learning needs.

Case study: Richard – Pedagogical choices in Primary English

Grove Park Primary School, West London

Walking into Mr Charlesworth's Year 3 classroom it's clear to any visitor that this is a class that loves English. There's a book corner, text-rich classroom displays and language prompts pop out from every wall. The available resources are culturally diverse and the lives of the children in the class are reflected in the range of texts they read. The lesson prompt sheets are beautifully presented, offering children a model of what quality work looks like. Other displays in the classroom become more visible the more you look – there are messages to the children, 'How can I improve my work?' and there are topic words to support new vocabulary in maths and science. Each class at the school is named after a native British tree, Richard's is called 'Aspen', which he has linked to a line by Meg Murry, the main character, in 'A Wrinkle in Time', in which she says, 'she was completely unaware that her voice was trembling like an Aspen leaf'. This is a class teacher who knows his children's literature. The other featured authors are Beverley Naidoo and in guided reading, the children explore 'The Ice Palace' by Robert Swindells.

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 3> What do good subject leaders think?

English is certainly a strength of mine, and one I enjoy teaching. It's multi-faceted nature and constant evolution means that there is always new literature to use in the

classrooms and new approaches to try out in practice. I have never been one to stop learning. It's the joy behind the job and the reason I teach.

In their literacy lesson, the children are learning how to structure a non-chronological report, in the form of a cold weather survival guide, and they use their knowledge of the guided reading text to justify their choices. The discussion with Mr Charlesworth and the children is lively and genuine. He asks questions about the text, he asks for reasons behind responses and both he and the children know this story well. The children are confident in their book talk; they give their reasons predicated on, 'the way he describes it' (as if Robert Swindells is known to them personally). The conversations and book talk are carefully managed through a structured conversation – Mr Charlesworth knows where he's headed, this is not a 'guess what's in the teacher's mind' conversation. As the children set to work, they read through a pre-prepared modelled example of a non-chronological report. In this class, a final draft is always shared with the children – the children do not produce a paragraph or section a day across the week, but instead, are encouraged from the outset to work towards the final piece. Mr Charlesworth says this is 'letting the children in on the game'.

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 2> Reflection point

- What is your initial reaction to the idea of sharing a final modelled writing exemplar to children?
- If this isn't the approach you adopt, can you explain to Richard why you would instead scaffold the exemplar over the course of the week?
- Are you confident that staff in your school are knowledgeable about children's literature and are able to explain why it is important for teachers to be readers?

At the end of the lesson Richard (Mr Charlesworth) takes time to explain the choices that he's made both in the planning and in the teaching of the lesson. He is currently studying for an MA in children's literature – his tutor is Michael Rosen – this is a teacher who knows his stuff. Richard is in the seventh year of his career and he's taught across Key Stage 2 but thinks Year 6 may be his favourite to teach. It is Richard's second job and he's as surprised as anyone that he has such passion and affinity for teaching English. He started out thinking that he would be a maths

teacher, but found himself at the end of his 3-year course being so inspired by his English tutor that he wrote his dissertation on picture books and critical thinking. He explains that much of his curriculum planning is literacy-based and with an emphasis on immersing the children in language and structure. He talks of the type of activities that develop the children as young readers and writers; he mentions his classroom displays and how he draws out good examples of language and he encourages children to magpie ideas and explains to them why this is a useful strategy. Richard explains his approach to the teaching of reading in a class of varied ability but shared positive attitudes. He lists a range of strategies, the embedding of grammar across reading and writing tasks, the integration of texts from the imagined world and the real world.

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 1> What do good subject leaders do?

St Anthony's Primary School in Renfrewshire, Scotland was the UKLA Literacy School of the Year (2018). All the school's teachers attend a monthly children's book club and the majority of the school staff have completed a master's-level module in children's literature.

Richard talks with passion about reading for pleasure and the importance of children making their own book choices when selecting a library book. The children all read on a 1:1 weekly basis to Richard, regardless of whether they are an experienced or struggling reader. He reads aloud on a daily basis and these are texts in addition to the agreed texts linked to each year group's curriculum maps. In Year 3, the children study The Ice Palace, Charlotte's Web, Stone Age Boy, Danny the Champion of the World, Norse Myths and the Village that Vanished. The choice of texts exemplifies a teacher who knows literature – there are familiar texts, picture books, favourite authors, as well as texts highlighting diverse cultures. The children are enjoying a rich literary diet. Across the school, reading buddies work across year groups to talk about books and reading choices. Richard uses Aidan Chambers' 'Tell me' approach to encourage purposeful book talk and uses the PEE principle – Point, Evidence, Explain – to develop children's skills in reading comprehension skill. He adds one more – Linking – to create the acronym PEEL; making the case once more that reading and writing are inextricably interconnected. Richard talks confidently

about his pedagogical practices – he refers to models of personal growth, of a teacher's internal narrative and the importance of meaning-making and citizenship.

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 2> Reflection point

- How would you define Richard's literacy pedagogy?
- Are you confident that Richard is able to explain the practice in his classroom beyond describing the children's learning?
- As English subject leader, what goals or targets would you set for Richard?

Richard chose to pursue his Master's in children's literature and as well as this formal learning, he also seeks out informal professional development opportunities. He follows authors and other teachers on Twitter; he has completed courses (self-funded) at CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) and he is a member of UKLA (United Kingdom Literacy Association). His good work has been acknowledged by both his head teacher and across the local schools' cluster, and he has led workshops with teachers and parents where he emphasises collaboration and shared experiences.

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 3> What do good leaders think?

- Teachers need access to both informal and formal professional development.
- Collaborating across school clusters informs and supports all teachers.
- Knowledge of literacy organisations, networks and associations is crucial in supporting the school in taking an evidence-based approach to English teaching.

Teachers in the school are given creative freedom in their planning – there are no commercial or published schemes, just a curriculum vision of what the children in this school should be learning. Richard explains that he puts his efforts into producing quality resources and marking children's work rather than producing polished plans. He is firm in his commitment that each child, regardless of their background, should be set high expectations and that all children should see themselves as authors and readers. When asked to explain the importance of children becoming competent language users, he answers, 'Where don't you need reading in your life?'

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 3> What do good leaders think?

Creative approaches that seek to inspire further reading / research from the children, alongside a variety of writing opportunities, allow children the best possible chance to succeed and view themselves as accomplished readers and writers.

His practice has been influenced by his head teacher, Darren, who shares a passion for English and who himself is research-active and widely read. When Darren joined the school, he encouraged team teaching and modelled this himself by teaching every class using picture books. This approach became adopted into the school's repertoire, as every two weeks picture books are used as a stimulus for creative writing – for children and teachers. For this school, a contextualised curriculum means that English is a living, breathing subject – children go on trips, welcome visitors and they are given experiences, which means they have something important to write about and a ready audience of staff, children, and parents to share it with.

<INSERT ILLUSTRATION 2> Reflection point

- What is the role of the head teacher in ensuring there is shared school vision for English?
- How are the expectations communicated to staff?
- What was the support offered to staff?
- How would you, as the English Subject Leader, measure and evaluate impact and success?

Case study learning points

✓ **Define and articulate your pedagogy for English.** Seek out ways to make explicit the dynamic relationship between the learning, the teacher and your school's culture. Share your vision of English with the children, staff, governors, and the wider community and be confident about the ideas, beliefs, attitudes that underpin your decisions. Demonstrate excellent subject knowledge and know how this translates into an English curriculum that reflects both an awareness of the importance of purposeful reading and writing experiences and your understanding of the teaching and learning process that best meets the needs of your school's pupils.

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